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The obscene enjoyment of Jussi Adler Olsen

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In contemporary Scandinavian crime fiction a post-realistic tendency has been noticed. We see melodramatic turns, neoromantic tendencies, and a rising post-secular awareness. Together, these reactions may be responses to cultural changes in the welfare landscape of Scandinavian countries. Within these diverse approaches to genre changes, there has also been a significant attraction towards shrewd and radical culprits. Contrary to the socially sensitive treatment of criminality in much Nordic noir, these tendencies have as well given rise to portrayals of radical and absolute evil as a particularly popular approach to the genre.

In this paper, I draw attention to Jussi Adler-Olsen's widely popular Department Q novels with explicit emphasis on violence, obscenity, and evil. Even though these novels draw in the horns of realism in the narrative depiction of criminality, the radical evil still evoke a strategic social criticism propounded by the author both within the narratives as well as in popular comments on social predicaments. Social problems are not ransacked from a realistic perspective, but the surplus of evil expressed in the novels, nevertheless, figuratively continue the genre's immanent possibilities of social critique.

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The obscene enjoyment of Jussi Adler-Olsen

Let me introduce my short talk with a few witty lines by Terry Eagleton in his book *On Evil*:

“If Satan is what you are up against, rather than adverse social conditions, evil would seem to be unbeatable. And this is depressing news for (among other people) the police.” (Eagleton: 2010: 5)

In a way, this is a very persuasive portrayal of the department Q novels by the Danish author Jussi Adler-Olsen. The crimes depicted in his, by now, five novels are extreme and radical in a way that relaxes the crime thriller’s attention towards plausibility.

With its apparent religious context, it may seem a bit odd to talk of evil in a time as well as a genre that most frequently has pursued realistic accounts of events. Historically, narratives about crime and investigation have been tied to realism and verisimilitude.

However, a very striking discourse about evil revolves around Jussi Adler-Olsen’s five department Q novels. Initially, this takes place within the novels themselves where words and phrases describing crimes are taken directly from a religious vocabulary. In the latest novel, *The Marco Effect* [*Marco effekten*] (2012), we need to read no further than page two before we encounter the word itself.

In book reviews and interviews in Danish media, the word repeatedly turns up as well – and in a recent tabloid newspaper interview the author himself goes as far as almost referring to himself as ‘the messenger of evil’. Stressing the discourse of evil, the journalist rewords his answer into the title of the article: “I am the messenger of evil”¹.

In other words, the gap between Satan and the police in the quote from Eagleton may not be as clear as one would normally assume. The religious connotations rub off in the secular framing of criminality. You may say that the concept of evil has been secularized, but deeply within the word there are still remnants of mythology and metaphysics.

Speculative etymology could place Carl Mørch, the name of the policeman, directly within this discourse: By way of Middle Age Russian (*koról*) Carl means ‘man’ or ‘king’, while Mørch literally means ‘dark’ in Danish and by way of Old Norse (*merkwi*) would refer to ‘darkness’. In other words the name of the protagonist would mean ‘man or king of darkness’.

However, the name has a much more direct and simple meaning: 'Carl' is a reference to Jussi Adler-Olsen's real first name (Jussi is his middle name). Mørch, then, refers to a psychiatric patient that he befriended when he was a child. He was a patient of his father and his name was Mr. Mørk. He was, says Adler-Olsen, a very friendly patient that went crazy after having murdered his wife.

The name Carl Mørch, then, entails biographical roots, but basically the connection is still somewhat the same: Here we find a biographical and playful association to darkness and evil. And with obvious similarities between the department Q novels and American hardboiled crime fiction the name is a compiled reference to the fact that the investigator himself – by staring into the eyes of badness – becomes part of the nastiness².

Generally, the concept of evil has enjoyed a renaissance within several fields of criticism. Terry Eagleton's work is an obvious attention towards evil in literary criticism. In a Scandinavian context the word has been revitalized within social psychology, philosophy, journalism as well as political theory³. Between these fields of interest there are of course many differences, which I do not have time to work my way through here.

Jussi Adler-Olsen has, then, very deliberately placed himself – both within and outside fiction – within this context. He was quick to pick up on the discourse of evil, but this has been – from the first novel – a clear motive in his attempt to create a formula that would differentiate his novels in the huge market for Scandinavian crime fiction. Very often he emphasizes that he does *not* write crime fiction but crime thrillers. In a TV-interview he once went as far as correcting a journalist that called him 'the king of crime fiction'. He would much rather, he said, be considered 'the thriller king'.

This attention towards thrillers rather than puzzle narratives has very basic consequences for the plot constructions in the department Q novels. In all novels the narrative is primarily structured around the investigation of old, unsolved cases. Ultimately, Carl Mørch is actually personally involved in an unsolved crime that took place before the first novel – and this mystery runs through all novels so far creating a serial structure tying together the various plots of the separate novels.

Though, throughout the novels the reader knows much more than the investigators. Sometimes stylistically hidden, other times with knowledge of the perpetrator's identity, the reader follows the crime being committed. Instead of gaining knowledge from a distance, as is the case for the investigator, the reader is invited deeply into the heart of radical evil. Very often this is from

the point of view of the victim, which places the perspective of crime closely associated to his or her suffering and pain. This is the very strategy that gets us, the readers, very close to the specter of evil and deliberate violence.

The title of my talk – “The obscene enjoyment of Jussi Adler-Olsen” – is taken from Terry Eagleton’s employment of the Lacanian concept of *jouissance*. ‘Obscene enjoyment’ refers to the idea of a type of pleasure that is so close to death that the enjoyment, as the English translation implies, becomes obscene. Pain and pleasure connects and – by way of the Freudian death drive – Eagleton associates the idea of evil with our basic longing for the original state of our organism, which is non-being. *Jouissance*, then, establishes a complicated convergence between the pleasure of destruction and the desire for self-destruction. Ultimately, the misery of destruction and the closeness to death, then, is reminder of one’s own existence. If I then had a bent towards psychoanalytical theories of *why* we read so much crime fiction about extreme suffering and violence, I could claim that we read it because it reminds us that we are alive.

Leaving this complicated psychoanalytical perspective aside, Eagleton’s literary examples prove that he as well uses the term as a description of the evil doer’s sadistic enjoyment of the deed. One example is, for instance, the witches in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* that show, he writes, “an obscene delight in dismembering creaturely life”. He notes that these accounts of sadistic violence may as well be a considerable description of how we would describe ‘evil’. Evil, he writes, seems to claim such self-contradictory phrases as ‘obscene enjoyment’ or ‘bliss of hell’. The basic assumption is that someone actually gains something out of doing evil. This way, then, the evil endeavor basically becomes associated with the idea of a motive – and in the context of crime fiction we know all about motives. Even if the motive is as simple enjoying the destruction and torment of others.

Turning back to Jussi Adler-Olsen’s novels, the portrait of violence is both very graphic and detailed, but interestingly enough his radicalization of violence still connects crime with a model of social critique. This is, as well, in line with many other Scandinavian crime authors such as Jo Nesbø and Stieg Larsson. In such a way, the non-realistic tendency in the construction of the plots still carries very meticulous references to problems of society.

The first novel *The Keeper of Lost Causes* (2007)⁴ is a revenge story. In this novel, though, the social critique is not particularly tied to the unsolved case about a kidnapped politician. But this indirectly connects to the overall discussion about the political discourse in Denmark. Security policy in general is the basic motivation for creating the department Q.

Revenge is a theme that takes up some room generally in Adler-Olsen's narratives as well as in crime fiction in general. Revenge is normally tied to what the Norwegian philosopher Lars Fr.H. Svendsen calls *instrumental evil* – a type of evil where the perpetrator has personal motives and personal gains from the deed. Svendsen points out that in certain extreme cases the action is so excessive that it may be called *demonic evil*, which seems to be evil for the sake of evil. However, it is still personally motivated by desire – that is, by obscene enjoyment. In the *Keeper of Lost Causes* the idea of keeping a woman in a pressure chamber for over two years may come close to this idea.

The second novel *The Absent One* (2008) takes the financial crisis as its point of departure and tells a story about the cynicism of business. However, the story involves a personal revenge as well, but both revenge and violence for financial gain may be considered an *instrumental evil* according to Svendsen. Basically, the novel is a consideration of greater or lesser evils, where the greatest is violence grounded in the financial system whereas revenge is incited by the first and greatest evil.

What I find interesting about Jussi Adler-Olsen's novels is that this model of evil becomes more and more complicated throughout the series. The third novel *Redemption* (2010) takes off from religious idealism as a motivation. Though, it is not basically a critique of religion. It is rather a discussion of the social conditions that may result in violence.

The philosopher Svendsen rejects that there would exist such a thing as *social evil* where the perpetrator is instigated by social conditions. His claim is that this would excuse violence. However, we do find this type of violence a lot in a socially conscious Scandinavian crime fiction tradition. In other words, I need this type of evil to consider fictions about it.

Terry Eagleton does in fact propose a specter of evil going from “literally demonising” the perpetrator to appealing to “social conditions”. Within this specter we would find my four types of evil in crime fiction: *instrumental*, *idealistic*, *demonic*, and *social evil*.

The fourth novel, *Journal 64* (2011), is perhaps the most complicated considering *types of evil*. The point of departure is idealistic, right-wing politics about who has the right to bear children. Basically, this is an extreme idealism bordering on Nazi ideology. This may, then, be the incentive for social conditions producing violent outburst from the ones who suffer from this social model. Though, the novel voices this motivation as revenge. Generally, it is then a mix of idealistic, social, and instrumental evil and violence.

The same goes for the fifth novel *The Marco Effect* (2012). The novel takes off from a variation of Charles Dicken's *Oliver Twist*, which introduces its focus on the social motivations for committing crimes. But the grounding evil, again, turns out to be financial gains for the few. In other words, instrumental evil.

These examples are but a few that I could draw attention to in Jussi Adler-Olsen's novels and in Scandinavian crime fiction in general. This short description – with a clear and dualistic distinction of good and bad – Adler-Olsen has an obvious interface with *the melodramatic tendency* outlined by Andrew Nestingen, *the neo-romantic tendency* described by Kerstin Bergman, and a *postsecular tendency* highlighted by myself⁵. The narrative formula of the most popular Scandinavian crime fictions seems in general to turn its back on realistic motivations. This may be a method of differentiation on a packed market, but the lack of realism – which may be described as post-realism – does not, however, seem to lose the somewhat genre-based rooted interest in society and social critique.

¹ Marie Lade: "Jeg er budbringer for det onde", in *Ekstra Bladet*, November 11, 2012, extra section, p. 8.

² However, Jussi Adler-Olsen does not act alone in the field of evil. Other authors of crime fiction – such as Arne Dahl, Camilla Läckberg, and Gretelise Holm – integrates very diverse discussions about crime as evil.

³ Terry Eagleton: *On Evil*, Yale University Press, 2010. Birthe Hoffmann og Lilian Munk Rösing (ed.): *Det onde i litteraturen*, Akademisk forlag, 2003. Rolf Kuschel and Faezeh Zand: *Ondskabens psykologi – Socialpsykologiske essays*, Frydenlund, 2004. Sara Normann Thorsen and Helle Dam Sørensen (ed.): *Ondskab – et politisk begreb*, Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 2008. Lars Fr. H. Svendsen: *Ondskabens filosofi*, Klim, 2002.

⁴ The titles of the first three novels refer to the US translations while the latest two are directly taken from the Danish versions which have not yet been published in English.

⁵ Kerstin Bergman: "The Well-Adjusted Cops of the New Millennium" and Andrew Nestingen "Unnecessary Officers", both in Andrew Nestingen and Paul Arvas (ed.): *Scandinavian Crime Fiction*, University of Wales Press, 2011. Kim Toft Hansen: *Mord og metafysik – Det absolutte, det guddommelige og det overnaturlige i krimien*, Aalborg Universitetsforlag, 2012.